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Shultz Calls for 'Crackdown' on Disclosure of Classified Data

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WASHINGTON, March 15 — Secretary of State George P. Shultz said today that "we need a crackdown" within the Government to prevent the disclosure of highly classified information.

Mr. Shultz, appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was questioned by two Democratic Senators, Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island and Paul S. Sarbanes of Maryland, about recent comments made by senior department officials about Leslie H. Gelb, national security correspondent of The New York Times.

An article by Mr. Gelb, published in The Times last month, described American contingency plans to deploy nuclear depth charges in some countries that do not possess them. The article noted that information about the plans had been published and discussed in those countries.

'Considerable Damage' Cited

Mr. Shultz, while conceding that reports on the plans had been published and discussed abroad, told the Senators that the article "has done us a considerable amount of damage."

He added that because Mr. Gelb had served in the Government, "in a post which is a particularly sensitive post," his writings took on "special authority." Mr. Gelb was director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs from 1977 to 1979.

"Therefore," Mr. Shultz said, "in my opinion, I think having held that post, you have a special responsibility, and I know that Mr. Gelb tries to exercise that responsibility, but still, publishing things that are harmful is hard to take," he said.

'You Have a Responsibility'

"I know I feel, with respect to any of the high Government positions that I have held, when I'm out of them, that in a sense, you can't leave them," Mr. Shultz said. "You have a responsibility to those offices."

At the same time, he described Mr. Gelb as "a person of tremendous stature, great ability," and said, "I don't want to in any way run him down."

After Mr. Gelb's article was published in The Times on Feb. 13, Lieut. Gen. John T. Chain Jr., current director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, forbade his staff to talk to Mr. Gelb. He also ordered the removal of an official office portrait of Mr. Gelb that had hung alongside those of other previous directors of the bureau.

In addition, General Chain posted a sign that said the picture had been removed "for cause," because Mr. Gelb had "did willingly, and knowingly, publish in 1985 classified information, the release of which is harmful and damaging to the country."

General Chain later allowed his staff to talk to Mr. Gelb and removed the sign but did not return the picture to its place on the wall. A State Department spokesman said this week that Mr. Shultz supported General Chain but also believed that Mr. Gelb was an "able journalist and a patriotic person."

'I'm Not Prepared to Apologize'

When Senator Pell asked Mr. Shultz today if Mr. Gelb had been extended an apology for the general's actions, Mr. Shultz, citing Mr. Gelb's "special responsibility," said, "I'm not prepared to apologize to anybody."

Mr. Shultz said that while in Iceland on a brief stopover Thursday, he found that the subject of the contingency plans "comes right up."

Noting that President Reagan is to travel to Canada on Sunday, the Secretary added that "I imagine the subject's going to come up" there as well.

Iceland and Canada are two of the countries where the document was first divulged and made a matter of record before Mr. Gelb wrote about it.

Mr. Shultz said that General Chain had done "a tremendous service" in drawing attention to the matter. The Secretary said he would like to sit down with members of Congress and the press to discuss the issue.

"Don't misunderstand me," he said. "I'm not saying we need to crack down on the press, but I think we need to call attention to the seriousness of the problem."

"We need a crackdown within the Government," he added, "but also there need to be some standards set. There are no standards of performance left around any more, and I think we've got to get back to that. It's sort of an old-time religion here."

'An Authoritative Statement'

When Senator Sarbanes asked Mr. Shultz if it were not true that much of the material in Mr. Gelb's article had already appeared in foreign publications and in debate in foreign capitals, Mr. Shultz said, "That's correct."

But he added, "The material that appears some place in a paper in another country may come or go, but when it appears under the byline of a recognized authority in a paper of the stature of The New York Times, it is taken as an authoritative statement."

"That being the case, the bearer of those responsibilities has a special impact," he said.

"The harm came, basically, in other countries from the added authority given to the material by the publication here in a newspaper of the stature of The New York Times," Mr. Shultz said, "which has the reputation of checking things out carefully and by a writer who is probably about as es-

teemed in this field as anyone in the world and who is known to have great access to material, and who served, as you noted, for two years in a post where the full stream of the most sensitive information about the United States Government's activities flow by. So that lends a credence and authority to whatever is published."

'A Special Problem'

Mr. Sarbanes asked if Mr. Shultz meant that there would have been "no problem" if it had been published in "some weekly newspaper somewhere" by "some cub reporter."

"No, I don't say that," Mr. Shultz replied. "I just say there is a special problem."

Mr. Shultz added, "I don't sit here saying that I know the answers to this problem."

In New York, Seymour Topping, managing editor of The New York Times, said in a statement: "The decision to publish the article in question was made by the editors of The Times, not by Mr. Gelb. The editors took into

account factors affecting national security and our obligation to inform our readers. Mr. Gelb consulted with White House and State Department officials before writing the article.

"Mr. Gelb left Government service in 1979 and joined the staff of The Times in 1981. He has fulfilled his duties as a reporter without making use of privileged information that might have been obtained when he was an official, and in full cognizance of all his responsibilities."